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New debate on Iraq war in House Democratic caucus embroiled

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Washington -- Anti-war lawmakers are forcing a new debate within the House Democratic caucus over President Bush's decision to go to war in Iraq, even though party leaders fear the effort could make Democrats appear unpatriotic.

More than 50 House Democrats signed a letter supporting a motion by Rep. Sheila Jackson Lee, D-Texas, calling for Bush to go back to Congress to ask for a declaration of war, even though the House voted in October to give Bush broad authority to take military action against Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein.

Jackson Lee has been circulating the measure for a few weeks and gained enough support among her anti-war colleagues, under party rules, to get a hearing on her motion at a House Democratic caucus meeting scheduled for today.

Jackson Lee, in an interview with The Chronicle, said she is willing to compromise on the language -- perhaps abandoning the call for a new declaration of war -- but hopes Democrats will take a strong stand on how the war and post-war peacekeeping efforts should be conducted.

"Wouldn't it be wonderful if we, as Democrats, began the dialogue about the next step, about how we keep the peace?" Jackson Lee said.

The new debate comes just days after House Democrats faced a tough vote over a resolution, written by House Republican leaders, to express support for U.S. troops and the leadership of their commander in chief. Democrats wanted to back American soldiers, but many did not want to give a stamp of approval to Bush's policies.

The House voted for the measure 392-11, with 22 lawmakers voting "present." Bay Area Democrats who voted "no" were Reps. Barbara Lee of Oakland, Pete Stark of Fremont and Mike Honda of San Jose. Rep. Sam Farr of Carmel voted "present."

House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi, D-San Francisco, who also opposed Bush's decision to go to war, urged her colleagues to vote for the measure so Democrats would appear united behind the troops in the Persian Gulf.

House Democratic leaders are nervous that voting for a new measure that challenges the president's foreign policy while military men and women are fighting in Iraq may be seen as unpatriotic. And forcing another vote on a war-related motion also could deepen the splits within the Democratic Party caucus over Iraq policy.

"There isn't one Democratic position on the war, other than to support the troops," said Brendan Daly, a spokesman for Pelosi. "And the Democrats overwhelmingly voted for the resolution to support the

Jackson Lee, an outspoken war critic who is vice chairwoman of the Congressional Black Caucus, urged a caucus debate over the merits of the conflict on Thursday, the day after the war began. But she immediately faced resistance from some colleagues.

Rep. Jim Marshall, a freshman Democrat from Georgia and Vietnam veteran, crashed her press conference and noted that, under caucus rules, she would have to wait five days before her motion could be heard.

"Now is not the time," Marshall said.

But Jackson Lee's supporters applaud her efforts to force a debate over the administration's handling of the war, arguing that airing dissenting views is democratic and patriotic.

Farr, who signed Jackson Lee's letter, noted that many anti-war Democrats have spoken at peace protests because it's one of the only places they can find a platform -- and receive media attention -- for their views.

"Those of us in the Democratic Party who have been outspoken in opposition to this war can't just be swept up in the president's sort of effort to put a positive spin on his policy," Farr said.

"It's important to have constructive debate," Farr added. "When you take it out of the government institutions, then you take it into the streets."

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